

## Laura Letson Is the Team Member of the Month

Laura Letson has quickly made a reputation in NOAA's National Ocean Service as a person who knows how to get things done. It is just that attribute which brings her this month's recognition as NOAA's June Team Member of the Month.

In the short time that Letson has worked at the Ocean Service's Center for Coastal Monitoring and Assessment in Silver Spring, Md., the management and staff there said she has had a tremendous, positive impact on the center's mission and has made a significant impression with her dedication and responsiveness.

As the center's program support specialist, Letson works closely with center management in everything from detailed program planning to developing informational briefings for NOAA senior management, responding to questions from Capitol Hill, and helping formulate a non-point source pollution strategy.

"Laura is an important part of our team," said Russell Callender, who nominated her for NOAA recognition. "She brings a strong work ethic, teamwork and customer service orientation to everything that she does and is becoming well known in the Ocean Service for her ability to get things done quickly and efficiently."

One of Letson's more recent and notable contributions was her leadership and initiative in completing the final crucial steps in moving the Operational Gulf of Mexico Harmful Algal Bloom Forecast System from the research realm to a soon-to-be operational product. When it becomes available later this year, it will represent a major step in NOAA's goal of creating an operational national harmful algal bloom forecast system.

Largely on her own initiative, Letson actively engaged senior staff and office management in three Ocean Service program offices—the National Centers for Coastal Ocean Science, the Coastal Services Center and the Center for Operational Oceanographic Products and Services—to finalize discussions and make the decisions needed to make the harmful algal bloom forecast product operational. Under considerable time pressure, she was able to reach consensus among the offices and accurately represent the concerns of NOAA senior management.

This effort also enabled her to develop briefing materials requested by NOAA's assistant administrator for the National Ocean Service, Richard W. Spinrad, for presentation to NOAA Administrator Conrad C. Lautenbacher, Jr. Although her primary responsibility was simply to prepare briefing materials, she took the extra initiative to work well beyond the expectations of her position by developing consensus across the National Ocean Service.

"All the briefings, all the paperwork, all the approvals--she got it all done," said Richard Stumpf, the lead scientist for the harmful algal bloom forecasting project. "It may sound small, but it was not trivial at all. The success of the project required getting these things done so we could determine budgets, staffing, the details necessary to move forward. Laura was instrumental in making that happen."

Letson grew up in the bluegrass hills of Kentucky, graduating Phi Beta Kappa from the

University of Kentucky with a degree in biology. Before coming to NOAA as a Sea Grant Knauss fellow, Letson explored a variety of career options.

After graduation, she worked first as a zookeeper in Louisville, then as a volunteer sea turtle biologist with the National Park Service at Buck Island Reef National Monument in the U.S. Virgin Islands. Letson then worked as an Alzheimer's disease researcher at the Sanders Brown Center for Aging in Lexington, Ken. However, the environment proved to be her main career interest, and she took a post as an environmental scientist and noise specialist for the Florida Department of Transportation.

After four years, Letson attended graduate school at the Yale University School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, where she received her masters degree in environmental management, completing her studies in only one year. She then came to Washington, D.C., as a Knauss Sea Grant fellow, working for NOAA's Office of Coastal and Resource Management.

In 2003, she accepted a contract position in the National Ocean Service senior scientist office, before joining the Center for Coastal Monitoring and Assessment.

“I appreciate the recognition the office is giving me for the work I am doing,” Letson said. “I am excited to see the project move closer to an operational status. It has been beneficial to the Ocean Service, and I have benefitted personally from what I have learned.”